

## **Episode 24: Everything I Know**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty four: Everything I Know.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** *It starts with a prophecy, Rhia said, and ends with a death. It starts with a promise and a spark of magic and ends with balance and peace hard-fought. It ends with stubbornness and forgiveness and two souls from somewhere far away. And that is all I know.*

*Of everything?* I asked. We sat on the roof, one we'd climbed to through a library window so far back into the maze of books it would take ages for anyone to reach us and had taken ages to find in the first place. The night air was cold with the dregs of the winter - spring would come soon, it would, but even that promise wasn't met with the same desperation as anywhere else. Rhysea never got cold like it did here - but I shivered.

Rhia's hair blew, long and wispy, around her face. The stars glittered in strange constellations I hadn't the names for. It's peculiar, to see the sky above you so different from anything you've known. But they're the stars. No matter to where they belong, there is always some comfort in the stars.

*No, she said. Just of the prophecy.*

*There will be a soldier poet king,* I reminded her, tentative and slow. *What about them?*

*They will be there. She said. And one of them will die.*

*Which one am I?* I asked.

*I don't know,* she said. *Not for certain.*

But we both had our suspicions.

*Who are the others?*

*I don't know,* she said. *But I wonder.*

And - silence. *Which one of them will die?*

She sat, quiet. *I - don't know. At all.*

We sat in the dark and the starlight and waited until it felt a little less dangerous to keep talking.

*How do I find them?* I asked. *The soldier-poet-king?*

And this time she had a somewhat-answer.

*You acknowledge your wrongs. You make the hard choices.*

She paused. *And you run.*

My heart began to thud. As if she'd read my thoughts. As if that hadn't been the thing that I'd been toying with, daring to think, in the very corners of my mind. *The prophecy says to run?*

*The prophecy doesn't*, she told me, wrapping her arms around her legs. *But I do.*

*Why?*

*Let me tell you everything I know*, she said, and all the stories forbidden by kings came pouring out.

*Long ago magic was everywhere. Long ago the magic started to die along with the trees and the forest and the hope of the people. Long ago a king came and cut the forest down, and left the last great tree standing in his garden, for a witch told him if he cut it down it would mean the end of his line. In the tree was a sword.*

*My sword*, I said, a statement as a question I already knew the answer to. It hummed to me, as it always did, usually strapped to my waist now laid beside me on the roof.

*Your sword*, she answered.

*There used to be witches?*

*There used to be more people like you. And those who were afraid called them witches. Now those who are afraid call you eligida.*

*And what do I call them?* I asked.

She smirked. *Court. Cassian. Queen.*

*Cassian isn't afraid of me*, I retorted. He was smiles and golden light and curly hair and he tried to do right even if it was confusing and didn't always feel like it turned out that way, he was following the orders of his mother and father and hadn't been raised to know how to do anything else. If all of this was wrong and he was a tyrant it was because the people around him had molded him into such, but he could be changed, and I tried to explain all of this to her. *He's not afraid of me.*

*He's afraid of who he would be if he wasn't king*, she said, calmly. *He's afraid of what it would mean if he wasn't a part of the prophecy.*

*I'd still love him*, I said defensively.

She paused. *You love him?*

No, I said, because it was true. Yes, I said, because it was also true. *I love the good he's trying to be. Not romantically. (Maybe romantically, I didn't say out loud. But if so, maybe less now).* I cleared those thoughts from my head and continued my half-lie. *I don't know enough about him for that either way.* And then we both fell silent, remembering the betrothal, but I continued - my philosophy had been to pretend it wasn't happening at all. *But I know he's trying to be good, better than his mother, even if he doesn't know how to do it.*

*Even if he's doing it the wrong way. And I didn't tell her about the kiss, because that was something else entirely.*

*She didn't quite know what to say to this. So she said something else:*

*The queen is afraid of you.*

*I laughed. I'm afraid of the queen.*

*You should be. Fear makes people more dangerous. She fears the power you have and she fears what will happen to her because there's no way she can be soldier poet king. She knows that she is the tyrant and hopes it is not true, and she fears Cassian, because she fears that he will be the reason that she will lose her crown. And that makes her dangerous.*

*Are you? Afraid of the queen? I remembered the sharp slap of the queen's hand across Rhia's face. I saw the memory pass over her, twisting her face for half of an instant into something darker.*

*Yes, she said. Let me tell you everything I know.*

*Witches, I reminded her. We were at - not-quite-witches.*

*Yes, she said, and began again. A thousand years ago, there was an old soldier-poet-king. It was made of the soldier, the last great witch of the age -- the girl who warned the king not to cut the tree down -- and a poet who could make the water bend to her when she played her songs, who could spin golden thread with the words she sang. Then there was the king, a girl from a*

distant land, who could control the magic like - like me. They fought the king and all three died. He burned their bodies - but they say, that as the poet turned to ash, one last song poured from the funeral pyre -- the prophecy of the true soldier-poet-king. The poet, in her song, realized that the prophecy she had seen wasn't about the old three, after all, but instead a generation yet to come. But just like before, it would start with the coming of a strange girl, hair orange and wild like a lion's, in a shirt of gold like the way the old Eligida had arrived. And afterwards, the king found a collection of prophecies - all except for that very last one - in a thick book written half in Rhysean and half in a strange language --

My language, I realized. Your world got English because I'm not the first girl to have been here.

-- And the king kept it, she continued, and learned it. And passed it down - to his children, and a woman who trained a woman who trained a woman who trained a woman who became me.

But - what's in the book? I asked. If it doesn't have the prophecy.

Here, a ghost of a smile touched Rhia's face. From what I can see, it was how the king learned Rhysean. And it was how the poet and the witch - the soldier - learned your language. One wrote a passage in one language - a letter to the others, or a battle plan, or a story - or a something that has been turned

*into prophecy - and the rest helped translate it into the other language. You can see each of their handwritings in the pages.*

*I thought about that, the friendships and vulnerabilities and loves of these three girls now teaching material for Rhia, for Cassian. Were they very good friends?*

*Her eyes softened. Oh Ilyaas, they were more than friends.*

*Oh. What a thing to be your legacy. What a thing to turn into a political weapon.*

*And everyone else knows the one prophecy -*

*Because the version the poet sang was carried by the trees to the very edge of Rhysea, Rhia replied. And the rest of us have carried it in our hearts ever since. And the kings have twisted it into something their own as best they could, because they did not own it and could not control it.*

*And now it's starting again, I said. Statement, not a question.*

*Yes, she said. All that's left, this time, is the poet.*

*I froze, remembering her whispered words the night of the first raid. The old eligida had become the king - would have, if she hadn't been killed. And yet in this castle, I was the soldier. Maybe you're meant to be king.*

*Is Cassian the soldier, then?*

*Let me tell you everything I know about the kings, Rhia spat instead, evading the question. They raise taxes and raze*

villages and do not listen to the common folk. To not toast to their health is to toast against it. The receiving halls and palace and throne room grow more crowded with golden splendour by the day as miners die in their shafts, and yet they cannot stop for fear of the soldiers that stand at the top and watch them work. There is a draft for children as young as seven, from which new soldiers are made and fixed to the kings' will. And these children-to-soldiers lose all thought of who they could have become. Loyalty to kings over truth to self or love for family. They go home, but community is a dead word.

And I stand with them, I said, numbly.

And you stand with them, Rhia repeated, but you don't have to.

That was a dangerous statement to make, even out here in the dark and starlight, even when it was the same thing my heart had been whispering to me for days. The niggling of conscience in the back of my throat had been put into words, and that was a dangerous thing.

We sat in silence until the wind had swept her words into memory.

How do you know so much? I asked, finally. This isn't something the king tells you.

She pursed her lips. The cold pricked at my skin, making the hair on my arms stand up, but it was more than that. I -- it

was Known, capitalized and emphasized, before she ever said a word.

*Because I learned English from the book of prophecy and story and love, and took it as more than an elementary primer. Because I know I come from a home that is not the castle but I was taken before I could turn thought into memory. My parents live somewhere in the world and I have not seen them since the day I could walk, and that was because the Queen decided I would serve. Because I think I may know your soldier. Because I believe that you are the king.*

Hope blew in on the wind, and metallic fear followed it close behind. There was a lot of weight to those words - and they sat, thick, in the air around us. The way she phrased that implied - *Cassian is not a child of prophecy.*

Really, I responded, a statement not a question.

*The soldier leads the Fretim, waiting for the poet and king to unite the people of Rhysea. The world waits for the three to find each other, and that requires you to leave. And I tell you all this because I am --*

-- A rebel. I finished.

*Fretim*, she corrected. *It means... 'we brave collective.'*

*Fret* was brave, after all. *Ilms sians fret.*

Another moment passed, too heavy to do anything with but let the wind wash it into memory. Because now I held her fate in

my hands, something we were both wildly aware of. This was trust, a test with a life as the pass/fail. *Now what will you do with what you know?* Were the unspoken words. It was a dare. It was - braver than I could ever be.

*What do I do now?* I asked, because this was beyond what I knew. If Rhia was telling the truth, then everything I'd known for months was a lie.

If she was lying -- for the gain of her *fretim*, to have the *eligida* with them --

She wasn't lying. But I didn't know quite yet.

*I believe that is something you'll have to discover,* Ilyaas, she said. *You know what I think. I can do no other.*

She stood, preparing to crawl back through the window. I caught her wrist and pulled her towards me.

*Wait --* I said. *Do you know where the poet is? Our poet?*

Her face saddened. *I wish I did.*

Then I had some answer. I would wait for the competition, Cassian and the queen's way of filling out the soldier poet king, and I would hope that the right person found their way to us.

I would stay -- for now. And then the second this godsforsaken competition was over, I would run.

But Rhia had also spoken of a separate soldier. A rebel -- part of the *fretim*. And she believed this girl was the true soldier.

*One last thing*, I asked. *Can I -- can I meet this other soldier?*

The ghost of a smile quirked onto her face. *I'll make sure you do.*

Rhia disappeared into the stacks and I clambered back through the window. I opened a book on Rhysean grammar and fell asleep into it, praying it would hold as a cover story come morning.

I dreamt of the old soldier-poet-king. I dreamt of Rhia's whispered voice, *let me tell you everything I know*. I dreamt of Cassian's smile and redemption arcs for us both and the idea that no one was completely bad.

The stars shone through the windows, strange constellations and too-silver moonlight. *Let me tell you everything I know.*

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of

choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Ko-Fi at [ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast](https://ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast), where if you leave a topic in your donation box, I'll write you a ridiculous little lymerick to read out at the end of the show! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. I'm so proud of you for making it through your worst days and for finding happiness where you can. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.